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ABSTRACT

The problems of writer's block and writing apprehension have just started to be examined in conjunction with modern rhetorical theories and practices. One of the variables that can make students more vulnerable to writer's block and writing apprehension is the degree of freedom the student is granted in the writing assignments. Two such freedoms would be: (1) the amount of latitude a students is given in choosing his or her writing topic; and (2) the degree of latitude a student is given in envisioning and fictionalizing his or her own audience. To examine the relationship between freedom and anxiety, a researcher interviewed four students enrolled in elementary composition at West Chester University; the researcher also met with the instructor of the class to determine what he or she taught during the semester and what was expected of the students. Overall, students reported that freedom affected their writing negatively; they said they indeed suffered from writing blocks and writing apprehension when the topic or audience was too broadly defined. All but one of those interviewed preferred guidelines for topic suggestions. Results suggest further that an ideal program is one that provides students with a high degree of guidance early in the semester and then, as it prepares students for the processes involved in making independent decisions about writing, gradually allows students more latitude. (Contains 24 references.) (TB)

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ED 387 805

Kathleen M. Hunzer

"Freedom as Constraint in the Writing Process"

Writer's block is a common expression used by people as they discuss their writing habits. Just as common as writer's block is the anxiety many people feel when they think about the occasion of writing. The problems of writer's block and writing apprehension have both been examined in the past with respect to psychological variables, standardized test scores, and cognitive processes. However, the ideas of blockage and anxiety have just started to be examined with respect to variables associated with modern rhetorical theories. One of the variables that seems to be a source of impediment since it can make writers more vulnerable to writing apprehension or writer's block is that students are granted a higher level of freedom in the writing process. Two examples of the increased freedom are that (1) students are permitted to choose their own essay topics and (2) students may fictionalize the audience they want involved with the texts.

Some theorists believe that writers thrive on freedoms such as these, but C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon acknowledge that increased levels of freedom can sometimes impede the writing processes of students. Knoblauch and Brannon assert that

> The consequences for a writer, in the absence of some control, might be either an aimlessness derived from the unresisted temptation to sample diverse possibilities at random or, more seriously, frustration and even paralysis in the face of so many alternatives . . . [this is seen] in the rambling, disjointed efforts of some students and in the writer's block of others. (69-70)

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As Knoblauch and Brannon infer, when students are unable to cope with the increased freedom that they are allowed in their fist year composition classes, their writing processes can be impeded. Two types of impediments that can surface are writing apprehension, as discussed by John Daly et al., or writer's block, as discussed by Mike Rose.

Because students are granted an increased level of freedom in the first year composition classroom and are in control of more variables, the chance of writing apprehension or writer's block occurring can also rise. Thus, in order to alleviate the possibility that this freedom could cause apprehension or blockage, instructors should provide parameters that guide the writer through the freedoms. The guidelines should help prevent the possibility of the students' processes being negatively affected by the increased freedom. Therefore, the students are less likely to fall victim to the writing impediments attributed to writing apprehension or writer's block.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The first area where the level of freedom is increased through the implementation of modern rhetorical theories is when students are permitted to choose their own essay topics. This practice stands in opposition to the traditional pedagogy in which the instructor gives an assignment sheet that the students are expected to follow step-by-step. Donald Graves believes that the traditional pedagogy established a cycle of "writer's welfare . . . the dependen[ce] on the teacher for everything starting with the topic" ("Break the Welfare" 98). This dependence, according to theorists, does not allow the students to control the writing process, so students do not learn to work with their own ideas, an important aspect of the writing process. Therefore,

theorists believe that instructors should avoid assuming control and should encourage students to assert and defend their own ideas in their works (Donald Graves "Break the Welfare"; Hubbard; Murray).

By granting the students the freedom to choose what they will write about, instructors are trying "to help writers develop expressive competence through their sustained effort to investigate a genuine, provocative issue, on which they have the authority to take personally meaningful positions and about which they have full responsibility for articulating conclusions" (Knoblauch and Brannon 115). Thus, the instructor activates the students and encourages them to search for inspiration instead of waiting for the teacher to provide it. Because students are granted the freedom to search for their own meanings, they become actively, rather than passively involved with their writing (Flower and Hayes 32).

A second aspect of the modern rhetorical classroom that promotes an increased level of freedom occurs when students are allowed to create the audience who will be involved with the essay. This freedom is intended to show the students that no matter who the audience is to be for a text, the responsibility for characterizing that fictional entity called the audience lies in the hands of the writer both before and during writing (Ong 9-12). This responsibility belongs to the students even if the instructors assign a specific audience (i.e., a roommate, a dean, a teacher) because the students are in control of deciding what characteristics that audience will have. Therefore, a writer's audience will always be a fictional creation of the writer (Knoblauch and Brannon 67).

Whenever a writer fictionalized an audience, he or she also has to have the freedom to create a role for the audience to assume while reading the text, and the writer has to create a role for him or herself to assume in order to write with that audience in mind (Ede and Lunsford; Ong). Therefore, not only are instructors granting the writers the freedom to create the audience of the text, but because the writer adapts his or her words and ideas to suit that audience, the instructor is allowing the writer the freedom to be socially involved with the audience too.

When students are in writing situations where they becomes nervous or cannot write, they are said to suffer from writing apprehension or writer's block. Writing apprehension is the writer's reluctance to approach any activity that involves writing. The causes of the apprehension can vary between different writers just as the level of apprehension can vary. However, in all cases, the lower the level of anxiety, the easier it is for the student to have eventual success with writing (Aldrich; Bruffee; Daly; Daly and Hailey; Daly and Wilson; Rose Writer's Block; Selfe). When the level of anxiety or apprehension is high, the writer can experience writer's block. According to Mike Rose, this is when the writer is not able to begin writing the essay, or once started cannot continue because the words, ideas, or sentences will not flow (Writer's Block 3). Again, the causes of writer's block will vary with each different writer; however, once the causes accumulate in the writer's head, they cause tension, anxiety, frustration, and confusion as the writer writes. This accumulation is what hinders the writing process (Graves "Blocking"; Rose Writer's Block).

QUESTIONING THE THEORY OF INCREASED FREEDOM

Although theorists discuss the benefits of allowing students a high level of control in choosing their topics, the question is raised of how beneficial this practice actually is to students. It seems that such a high level of freedom could impede, intimidate, or discourage the students. If this is true, then some guidelines must be given to help students cope with the increased freedom.

The belief that students should create their own audiences is interesting since this belief encourages the students to accept more control in the writing process, but it also could create more anxiety in the students. This would be detrimental since an increase in the anxiety level can also increase the chance that the students' writing could be impeded. Therefore, guidance through the process of fictionalizing an audience could help alleviate some of these anxieties.

To examine how students actually react to the increased level of freedom that they experienced in their first year composition classrooms, I interviewed students who had taken English 120: Effective Writing I during the 1993 Fall Semester at West Chester University. I also met with their instructors to discuss what was required in the class, what exercises were used in the class, what the teacher expected from the students, and what the teacher believed he or she taught during the semester.

Overall, the students told me that having too much freedom to choose their own topics and to create their audiences can negatively affect their writing. A majority of the students said that they can indeed suffer from writing apprehension or block when they are given too much freedom in choosing their topics. Regarding the freedom to create

the audience, the students said that they do not always do this before they write; that is, the students said that they usually write their essays and then decide who will respond to the text--sometimes this is simply the teacher.

The comments made by the four students suggest that some writers function with less difficulty when given parameters or guidelines in the first year composition classroom because then the increased freedom is not overwhelming. In other words, instructors can create an environment that promotes a high level of freedom to the students, but within this environment the instructors can also provide "an orderly movement of mind" to guide the students through the writing process (Knoblauch and Brannon 70). Starting students with the minimal guidance necessary and then weaning them from this guidance should help the students successfully navigate the potentially impeding and dangerous waters of freedom that characterize the modern composition classroom and the pedagogies of the instructors.

STUDENT COMMENTARY ABOUT FREEDOM

Commentary provided by the students I met with illustrates that the students agree that having guidance through the increased level of freedom in the classroom is helpful. All but one of the students appreciated guidelines in topic selection, and all of the students agreed that guidelines were helpful when working with audience.

As I said, only one of the students did not like the idea of having guidelines about topic selection. However, the others agreed that the guidance helped. The first student said that she needs "flexibility" around the assignment so that she can "look forward to

writing." But, this does not mean that she wants too a high level of freedom. In fact, she said:

> I do like some guidelines instead of 'write a narrative paper' or something like that with nothing for me to go on because then I have all these possibilities. . . . I need somewhere to go, but I don't want only one way, especially is it's something that I don't like.

She liked the guidelines that were provided by her instructor, and these helped alleviate some of her anxiety.

The second student also remarked that having too much freedom would impede her usually smooth-flowing writing process. She feels that she writes her best "within certain boundaries; it narrows it down a little bit, but it's not so narrow that [you're] given a topic and forced to write on that." She said that when she did not have the guidelines, she hesitated before she wrote. Therefore, she feels guidelines helped her progress as a writer.

These two students can be classified as "anxious" or "apprehensive" writers, but the last subject is a writer who says she frequently suffers from debilitating writer's block. She said that she relied on the professor for topics until well into the semester. This student said that without this help, she never would have succeeded with writing.

The comments offered by these students clearly show that allowing students too much freedom in choosing a topic can be detrimental; therefore, the students responded favorably to the idea of using guidelines in the classroom. These guidelines will take away some of the students' independence, but although promoting independence may

theoretically help students advance as writers, these students needed some assistance to function within that independence.

When it came to creating an audience and involving that audience throughout the writing process, all four students agreed that they needed some assistance and guidance. The first student said that she writes for herself first and then thinks about who will receive the essay. She knew an audience was there, but she did not think that she was able to manipulate this while writing. Therefore, she often ignored the audience while writing so that she would not stumble.

The second student had a similar problem with audience. She said that writing to an audience created by her "would be more of a challenge" but that eventually she could do it. In general, to accommodate a specific audience, she said that all she does is put "a big word here and there." If she progresses past this view of audience adaptation, then she feels that her anxiety level increases and this could impede her writing. The third student felt similarly. She said that considering an audience that wasn't her age was "more difficult," but she was eventually able to do it. Therefore, these three apprehensive writers were able to slowly adapt to considering an audience within the guidelines established by the professor.

The last student, however, was never able to consider a specific audience while she wrote. She said that whenever she tried to think of an audience, she could not write. She was always worried about what that audience might think of what she was saying, and this blocked her because she did not want to "sound stupid" in her writing. This student said that she might be able to go back after the text is written and

adjust it for an audience, but that she could not do this adjusting as she was writing.

The comments offered by the students suggest that expecting students to create their own audiences before writing and then considering that audience while writing is too much to manage. This clearly correlates to Peter Elbow's findings in "Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." All four students said that picturing their audience as being their peers was the best for them, so perhaps this view of audience needs to be accepted more by the instructors.

CONCLUSIONS

The comments offered by the students about their first year composition experiences indicate that their anxieties from writing apprehension and writer's block can be successfully controlled if the teacher provides parameters for the students within the freedoms that are granted. As Donald Murray stated, "[I]t is our job as teachers of writing to create a context that is as appropriate for writing as the gym if for basketball" (227). In other words, we allow the students a certain amount of freedom, but through guidelines and parameters, we provide the context within which students can be successful.

If providing guidance and parameters will help students progress more smoothly through the freedoms that they are granted in first year composition, as the students said, then it should be the instructors' responsibility to provide enough connections between ideas and enough guidance so the students receive assistance but do not feel overwhelmed by freedom (D'Aoust; Downey; Olson "A Rationale"; Rose Writer's Block). One such pedagogical structure recommended by Catherine D'Aoust is that

instructors should establish stepping stones, a "cognitive ladder," to help students along. This is a structure where the "rungs" are close enough to help students, but far enough away to also challenge them (18). This "cognitive ladder" clearly resembles the parameters that I feel will assist the students with their writing processes, so this type of guidance should be provided in order to help the students become better students and writers.

Overall, the writing teacher is "a guide, a coach, a stimulator, a listener, [and] an informed responder" (Knoblauch and Brannon 102) who is concerned with helping students access their own knowledge (Corbett; Oliver). A guide helps students and coaches them through the writing process by providing guidance and suggestions. A guide should not abandon the students and let them fend entirely for themselves simply to promote the idea that students should have freedom in the writing process. How beneficial is freedom if students become anxious before approaching writing or suffer from writer's block during writing simply because they are unable to negotiate the freedom?

I feel that it is essential for instructors to implement pedagogies that will best assist the students through the writing process and motivate them to look on these positive experiences so their apprehension or block is diminished. If this means that an extremely high level of freedom is not granted to the students in the composition classroom, then I think this is what should be done. Modern rhetorical theory might not totally agree with this assertion, but this adaptation of theory will help the students feel more confident about their writing. Since guiding students to a better familiarity with their processes and to a higher level of comfort with their abilities is one

of the main goals of every composition instructor, then implementing structured freedom to alleviate composition anxiety will definitely be beneficial.

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